

# **Autism Today: Everything you need to know about autism**

## **Trust me, I'm a Junior Doctor**

### **Under-Informed Patients Should Stop Trying To Heal Themselves**

By Max Pemberton.

This commentary is excerpted from an essay in the Telegraph, UK.

I remember being struck by common, complications of infection with measles, mumps and rubella. Clinical meningitis, for example, occurs in a staggering five per cent of all patients infected with mumps. And the list goes on and on. These three diseases are serious, and yet up and down the country parents have been declining to have their children immunised against them. This was due to the paper published in the Lancet in 1998 that claimed to have found a link between the jab and autism. Despite repeated attempts to reproduce the research and in-depth epidemiological studies, no link has been found and the work has now been discredited in a Cochrane review, which combines the results from high-quality controlled trials.

But still parents refuse to have their children immunised.

It's not out of stupidity. In fact, in my experience, it is the educated parents who still refuse. The information that was presented to them in the media was convincing. It is easy to get drawn in by statistics, particularly when you only have the briefest understanding of the subject.

The irony of our complex relationship with medicine was evident last week when it was announced that there were fears that the UK may run out of vaccinations for 'flu. This was blamed on the "worried well" - middle-class, well-educated, sensible people who read newspapers and understandably panic that we are all going to die of bird 'flu. What people failed to realise is that the vaccination isn't anything to do with bird 'flu, or even the pandemic influenza viruses that occasionally rear their heads. It is to do with the standard 'flu virus. This is the same virus that kills thousands of frail and old people every year.

When it comes to health, there is a tendency to panic. But often, this is not directed at the things that we should actually be panicking about.

The same people who refused to have their children immunised with MMR are now hammering to get the 'flu jabs. But they miss the point.

There has been one doubtful research paper linking MMR and autism versus the many very real complications of measles, mumps and rubella; everyone worries about autism. But the real risk to public health has been the refusal of parents to have their children vaccinated, not the development of autism. And the real risk to lives will be a shortage of influenza vaccine, not avian 'flu. The "worried well" are not to blame; they are worried because they are told to worry.

Research is complicated and, often, in boiling it down to a few easily digested sound bites, the full complexity and meaning of the information is lost in the media. It is worth remembering that sometimes a little bit of knowledge can be far more dangerous than the very crisis it concerns.